



## CASE STUDY

# “You Can Go to College”: Foster High School

## Introduction

Foster High School, located in Richmond, Texas, is a school with a substantial enrollment of minority students (29 percent Hispanic students, 15 percent African American students) that has made noteworthy strides in improving the academic achievement and the college and career readiness of its students. Moreover, the gaps in academic achievement between White and minority students, and between lower- and higher-income students, at Foster High School have narrowed considerably.

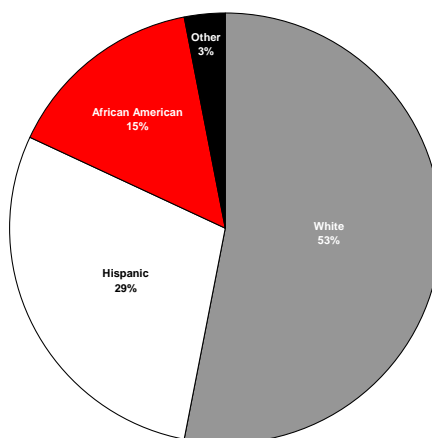
This case study highlights the achievements and advancements made by Foster High School between 2004 and 2008 and the policies and practices that have contributed to these achievements.

## *School Demographics*

Foster High School is part of the Lamar Consolidated Independent School District (CISD), which serves approximately 23,000 students. The high school was built in 2001 and its student population has more than doubled since then. The majority of first-year students at Foster High School come from Briscoe Junior High School, also located in Richmond.

Of the total fall 2008 Foster High School enrollment of 2,085 students, 29 percent were Hispanic, 15 percent were African American, and 53 percent were White (Figure 1). This racial/ethnic composition closely mirrors that in 2004, when 34 percent of students were Hispanic, 9 percent were African American, and 55 percent were White.

**Figure 1: Foster High School Racial/Ethnic Composition (Fall 2008)**



## EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT

ACT's College Readiness System includes a sequence of three longitudinal college readiness assessments: EXPLORE®, PLAN®, and the ACT® test. Based on extensive research into what postsecondary educators expect from entering college students, each assessment measures what students are able to do with what they have learned in school.

EXPLORE, for students in grade 8 or 9, provides baseline information on the academic preparation of students that can be used to plan high school coursework. PLAN, for students in grade 10, provides a midpoint review of students' progress toward their education and career goals while there is still time to make necessary interventions. The ACT, for students in grade 11 or 12, measures students' academic readiness to make successful transitions to college and work after high school.

### ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks

The College Readiness Benchmarks for the ACT represent the level of achievement required for students to have a high probability of success in selected credit-bearing first-year college courses. Success is defined as approximately a 75 percent chance that a student will earn a grade of C or better, or approximately a 50 percent chance that a student will earn a grade of B or better. The courses are the ones most commonly taken by first-year college students in the areas of English (English Composition), mathematics (College Algebra), social sciences (History, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, and Economics), and natural sciences (Biology). Data from 98 postsecondary institutions and more than 90,000 first-year college students were used to establish the Benchmarks, which are median course placement scores that reflect a high probability of student success in a college course.

Based on these Benchmarks, ACT has also established College Readiness Benchmarks for EXPLORE and PLAN. These scores indicate whether students, based on their performance on EXPLORE or PLAN, are on target to be ready for first-year college-level work by the time they graduate from high school.

## ACT's College and Career Readiness System

EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT are part of ACT's College and Career Readiness System (see sidebar). Each assessment tests how well students are learning the knowledge and skills that empirical research has shown are essential to postsecondary access and success. The system therefore enables schools to monitor the progress of their students toward college and career readiness and make needed academic interventions with students who are falling behind. Effective use of the data provided by student results on EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT is an important variable in a school's ability to improve the college and career readiness of its students.

The Lamar CISD administers EXPLORE and PLAN to all eighth and tenth graders. Approximately 37 percent of Foster High School's 2008 graduating class took the ACT; this percentage increased by 3 percentage points between 2004 and 2008. EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT are used by Briscoe Junior High School and Foster High School as supplementary sources of information for administrators, teachers, and students. Some teachers have found the test results useful in identifying areas of weakness for students in need of supplemental instruction. Many teachers have also found the UNIACT Interest Inventory (a career exploration tool included with the ACT programs) useful in identifying students for Foster High School's Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs.

## Improvements at Foster High School

Across racial/ethnic and income groups, ACT-tested graduates of Foster High School have seen notable improvements in five areas: test score increases, taking a core curriculum, college and career readiness, educational aspirations, and enrollment in college. The improvements in each area are discussed below.

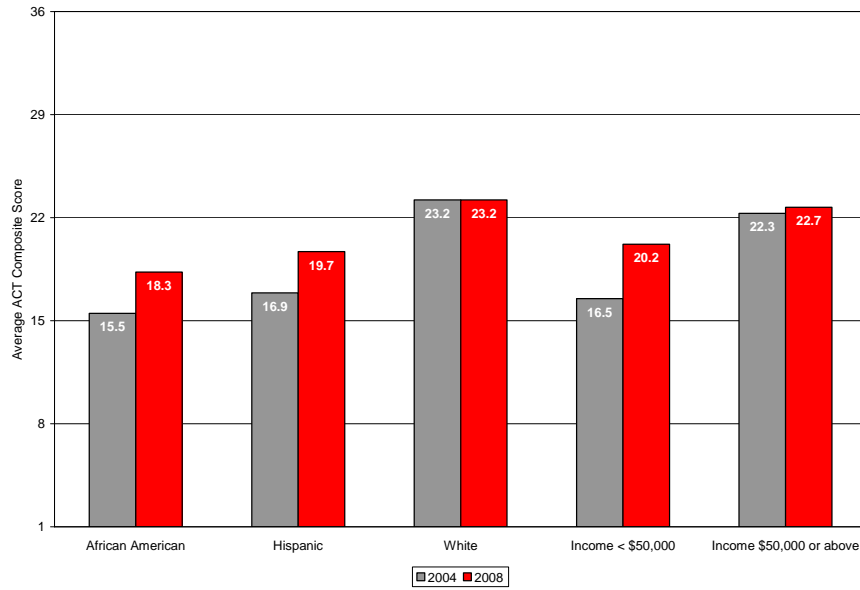
### 1. Test Score Increases

- Between 2004 and 2008, average ACT Composite scores increased by 2.8 points for Hispanic and African American students while remaining unchanged for White students, and by 3.7 points for lower-income students compared to 0.4 point for higher-income students (Figure 2).<sup>1</sup>

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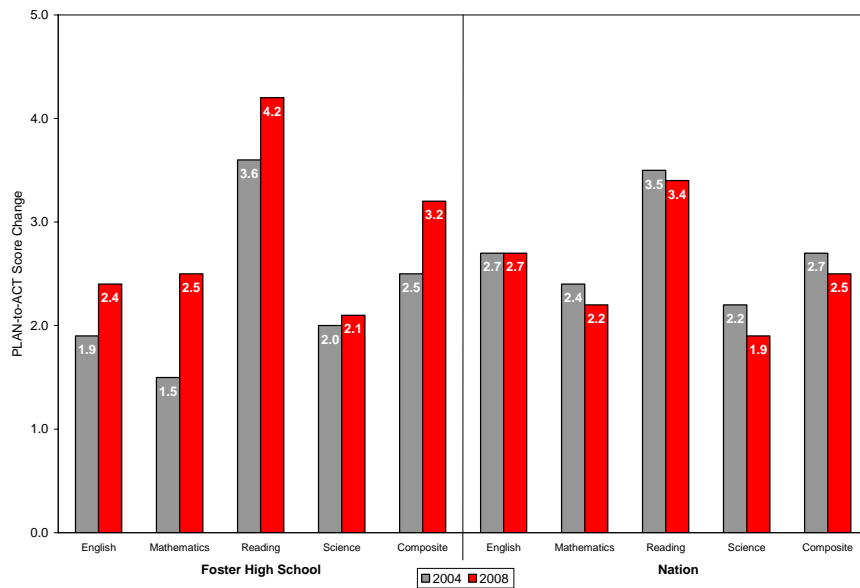
<sup>1</sup> In this study, lower-income students were those who reported annual family incomes below \$50,000, and higher-income students were those who reported annual family incomes of \$50,000 or higher. Approximately 30 percent of students did not report their family incomes: the results for this group were consistent with results for reported income groups (i.e., ACT scores increased between 2004 and 2008).

**Figure 2: Average ACT Composite Scores**



- For Foster High School graduates who took both PLAN and the ACT, score gains from PLAN to the ACT were larger in 2008 than in 2004 across all subject areas, compared to slight declines in average Mathematics, Reading, and Science score gains for students nationally (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> In 2008, the PLAN-to-ACT gains shown by Foster High School students were larger than those of national high school graduates for Mathematics, Reading, Science, and the Composite. By comparison, in 2004, average PLAN-to-ACT score increases for Foster High School graduates were generally smaller than those of high school graduates nationally.

**Figure 3: Average PLAN-to-ACT Score Changes**

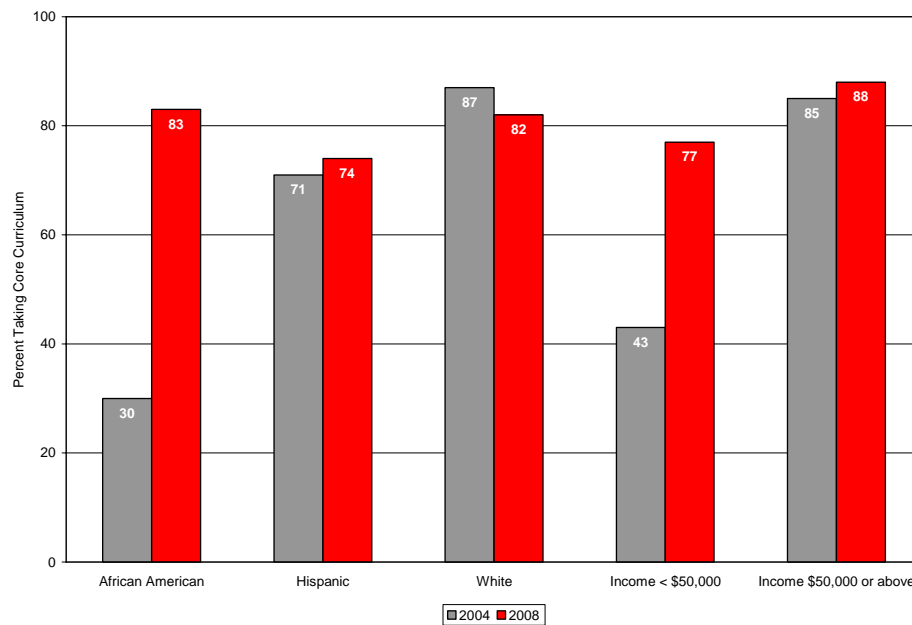


<sup>2</sup> PLAN and ACT scores are reported on a common scale, with 32 the highest possible score on a PLAN subject test and 36 the highest possible score on an ACT subject test. The lowest possible score on each test is 1.

## 2. Taking a Core Curriculum

- Between 2004 and 2008, the percentage of ACT-tested Foster High School students taking the core curriculum recommended in *A Nation at Risk* (four years of English and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies) increased for Hispanic students (by 3 percentage points) and African American students (by 53 percentage points; Figure 4). The percentage of lower-income students taking the core curriculum also increased substantially during this same four-year period (by 34 percentage points).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 4: Percentages of Students Taking Core Curriculum**

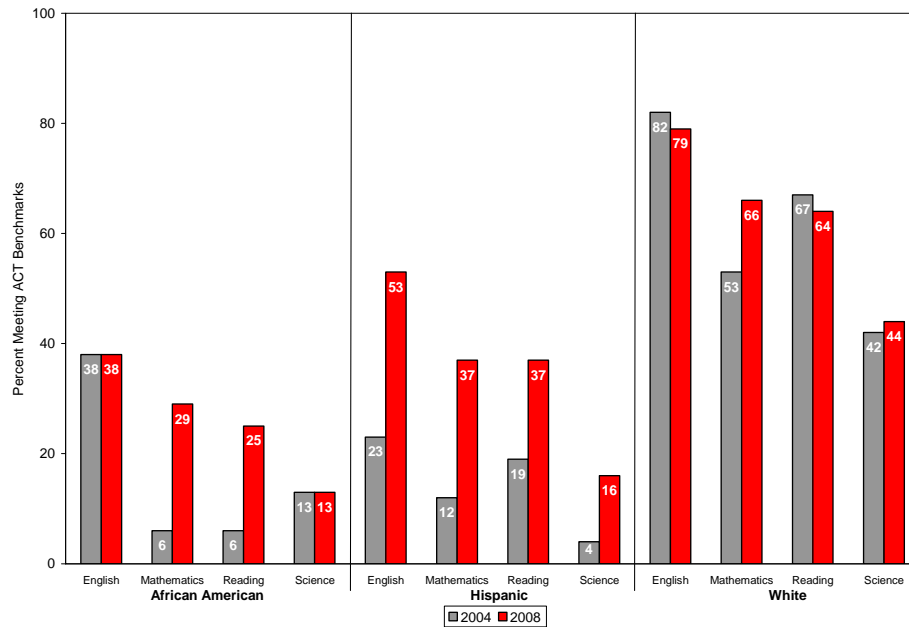


## 3. College and Career Readiness

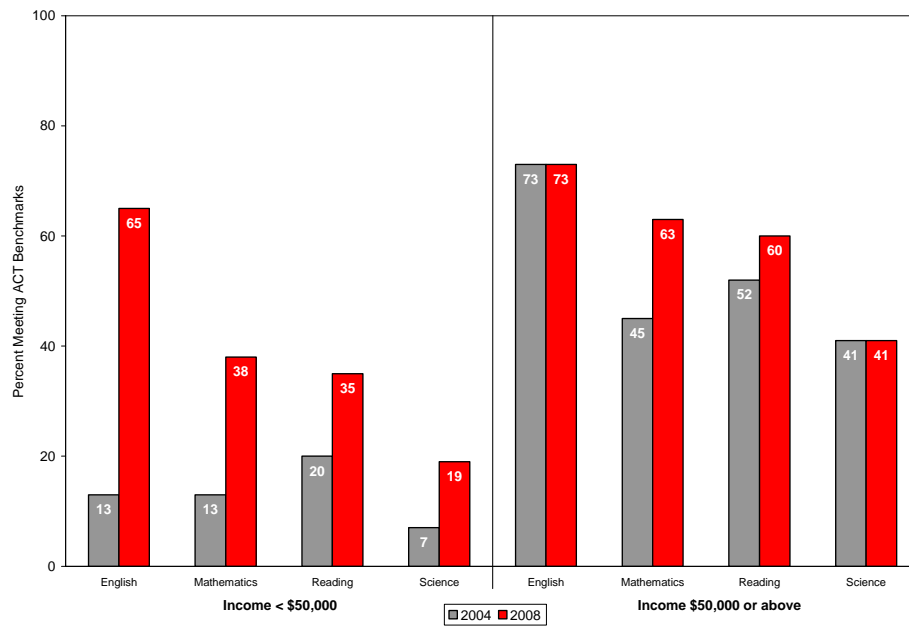
- Between 2004 and 2008, the percentages of ACT-tested Foster High School students meeting or exceeding the College Readiness Benchmarks for the ACT (see sidebar, p. 2) generally increased (Figure 5), especially for Hispanic students (between 12 and 30 percentage points, depending on the subject area) and lower-income students (between 12 and 52 percentage points; Figure 6).

<sup>3</sup> Beginning with students who entered ninth grade in the 2004–05 school year, the state of Texas mandates that nearly all high school students take a curriculum that exceeds the one recommended in *A Nation at Risk* in order to graduate. Because the coursework of many of the ACT-tested 2008 high school graduates of Foster High School would therefore have been affected by this mandate, much of the increase reported here can be attributed to this change in Texas high school graduation requirements.

**Figure 5: Percentages of Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, by Racial/Ethnic Group**



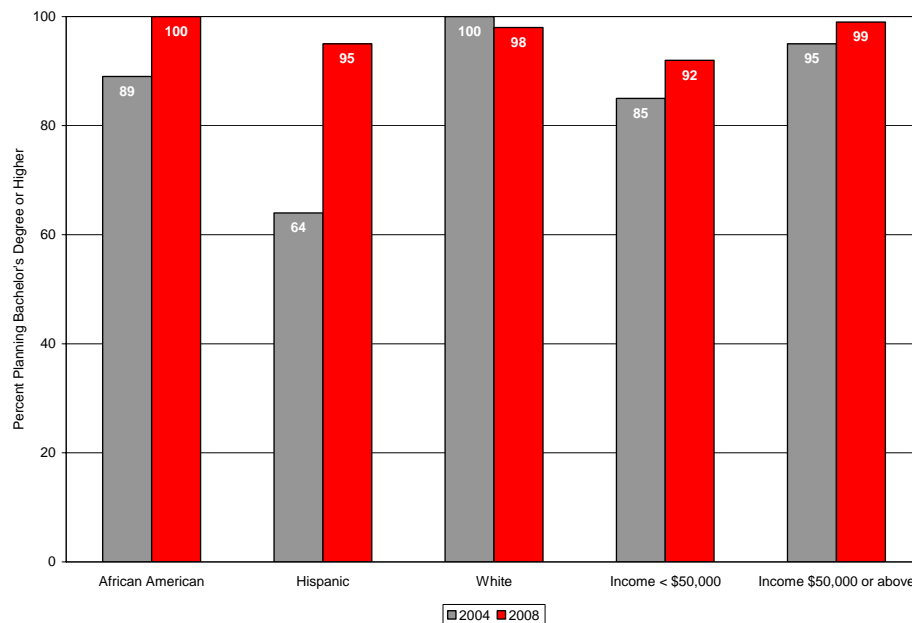
**Figure 6: Percentages of Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, by Income Group**



#### 4. Students' Educational Aspirations

- Between 2004 and 2008, the percentages of ACT-tested Foster High School students aspiring to earn at least a bachelor's degree increased for both Hispanic (by 31 percentage points) and African American (by 11 percentage points) students, as well as for both income groups, while decreasing by 2 percentage points for White students (Figure 7).

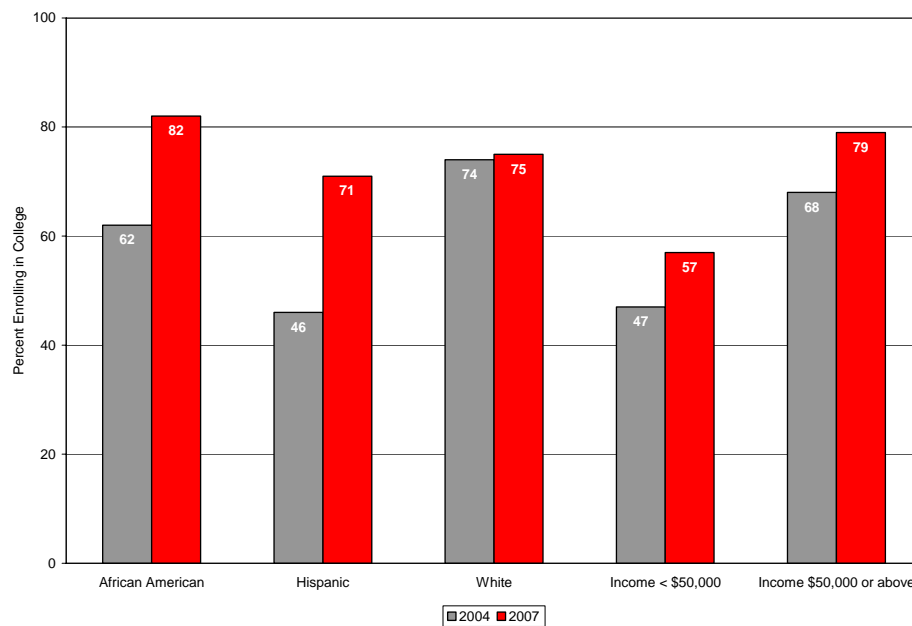
**Figure 7: Percentages of Students Planning to Earn at Least a Bachelor's Degree**



### 5. Enrollment in College

- Between 2004 and 2007, the percentage of ACT-tested Foster High School students enrolling in college in the fall immediately following high school graduation increased by 25 percentage points for Hispanic students, 20 percentage points for African American students, and 10 and 11 percentage points for lower- and higher-income students, respectively (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Percentages of Foster High School Students Enrolling in College**



## **Policies and Practices at Foster High School**

Researchers from ACT visited Foster High School to survey and interview teachers, administrators, counselors, students, and parents to identify those policies and practices that appeared to be consistent with the improvements detailed in the previous section. The benefits associated with the programs and policies described here should be viewed collectively, rather than as the result of one or more isolated program or policy; viewed as such, these policies and practices lend insight into how this school is improving student readiness.

### *Administration*

The administrators at Foster High School strive to be deeply involved in day-to-day operations and demonstrate a genuine concern for the well-being of students and staff. At Foster High School, faculty and staff involvement in decision making is encouraged and excellence is valued. A “Leadership Team,” composed of school administrators, counselors, department heads, and instructional specialists, serves to connect the administration and faculty in addressing a variety of school needs, both immediate and future.

Foster High School’s administration makes every effort to provide instructional staff with what they need to maintain high-quality classroom instruction and pursue their professional development. As one teacher commented, “I have never worked in a school where you get constant praise. I thought I had died and went to heaven when I came to Foster.”

### *Goals*

Foster High School, which has an accountability rating of “Academically Acceptable” from the Texas Education Agency, includes as one of its strategic goals the attainment of an “Exemplary” rating. All administrators and the Leadership Team stressed the importance of working towards this rating. Ratings are based on the school’s Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) results, high school completion rate, and dropout rate. To be awarded an “Exemplary” rating, 90 percent of all students in the school, as well as all racial/ethnic and income groups, must pass the TAKS test. Additionally, 95 percent of all students, as well as of each racial/ethnic and income group, must have either completed their education or be continuing their education four years after entering high school. Finally, no more than 2 percent of all students, as well as of each racial/ethnic and income group, can have dropped out of school.

Foster High School’s curricular priorities and academic goals focus heavily on federal No Child Left Behind regulations; state of Texas standards, as defined by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS); and postsecondary education requirements. In addition to these overarching factors, both school- and district-level goals, in conjunction with workforce demands, inform curricular priorities at Foster High School.

While federal, state, and district standards and goals are a major driving force in many efforts, they are by no means the final goal. This was explained by an assistant principal from Foster High School: “We want to be sure that the instruction that those students have every year is adding value to them. It is not

just passing that TAKS, it is letting them be that enriched learner so that as they go through school all those years and they come up and they take the college entrance exams and that they go on to college after graduation, that they are well prepared for that.”

Foster High school emphasizes “adding value” to every student by working together to improve academic achievement, increase state assessment scores, and reduce student dropout rates. As another assistant principal noted, the goal of the school is “to provide students with a superior education and leadership opportunities, as well as provide them with the tools needed to become productive citizens.”

An expectation of high standards in the classroom by teachers and administrators at Foster High School supports each student’s academic achievement. Whether individually or in conjunction with other teachers during common planning time, teachers are encouraged to monitor student data to identify weaknesses and individualize instructional approaches. In conjunction with Wharton County Junior College (WCJC), students have access to dual-credit courses in several subject areas that are taught by high school teachers with at least a master’s degree. These dual-credit courses are transferable to any college in the state of Texas. Dual-credit course offerings—and data-driven decision-making and administrative demands for high standards in the classroom—illustrate the emphasis placed on academic achievement at Foster High School.

#### *Experienced and Committed Faculty*

Many people at Foster High School attributed the school’s success to its experienced and highly dedicated teachers. All teachers at the school are fully certified to teach in their subject area. The average number of years of teacher experience is approximately 10, with approximately one in five teachers having more than 20 years of teaching experience. Regardless of their experience, however, teachers continue to participate in many professional development opportunities and express an openness to learning new techniques and approaches.

Foster High School emphasizes a team approach to instruction that is commended by most teachers. While collaboration between content areas is limited, collaboration within content areas is supported through formal mentoring of new teachers, “buddy” teachers, and professional learning communities. The formal mentoring program matches new teachers to experienced teachers in the same subject area. Mentor teachers receive training to help them address the needs of new teachers, and meet with the new teachers regularly to discuss various topics and report back to the administration on their progress every six weeks. The “buddy” teacher program pairs two teachers, typically in the same subject area, who become responsible for each other. Buddy teachers help each other and provide backup when needed.

Common planning time has recently been implemented at Foster High School. Classes are scheduled so that teachers in the same department have the same planning period, facilitating cooperation between teachers within subject areas, helping the transition toward common lesson plans and assessments, and encouraging the development of stronger curricula. In addition, it encourages the development of professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs are formed



by teachers of the same course, so that experienced teachers can share what they have learned with young teachers, who in turn bring their enthusiasm and new techniques to the group.

Professional development is both encouraged and required. Classroom teachers certified after September 1, 1999, are required to have 150 hours of continuing professional education every five years to maintain their teaching certification credentials, and master teachers are required to have 200 hours to retain their master teacher license. All teachers in English language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science who teach gifted and talented students are required by the Texas Education Agency to have 30 hours of Gifted and Talented training, as well as 6 additional hours of training each year thereafter that they continue to teach such students.

Of the approximately 122 teachers, 30 have master's degrees and others are working toward them. Three Foster High School teachers are qualified to teach dual-credit courses that require them to have a master's degree and be employed as a faculty member of WCJC.

In addition to state-mandated professional development for teachers, Lamar CISD has implemented a wide range of district-sponsored programs for teachers. One program focuses on training teachers to develop "positive, productive, trusting relationships" among fellow teachers and their students. At the heart of this program is the concept that "if you have a child's heart, you have his head." Another program, the Total Respect Uniting Students and Teachers initiative, focuses on character education. Each month a different character trait such as honesty, respect, responsibility, positive attitude, high expectations, discipline, or integrity is highlighted.

Through a third program, teachers develop their classroom management skills. This program focuses on techniques that reduce student disruptions and distraction in order to create a more productive learning environment. A fourth program helps Foster High School teachers create an inclusive classroom by using differentiated instructional practices to better serve the diverse students in their classroom. Building upon the philosophy that "every kid makes a difference," this program helps to equip teachers and staff with techniques to help each student.

### *Strong, Aligned Curriculum*

With school and district-level support, the faculty and staff of Foster High School work together to develop a strong, aligned curriculum. The TEKS define key instructional concepts and timelines for each class so that students in different classrooms but the same course are taught the same material at approximately the same time. These essential content areas are codified in the "Scope and Sequence" documents for the course. Teachers are then able to choose the method(s) they feel are most appropriate to teaching these skills to their students. District-level subject specialists work with teachers at all district schools to coordinate and facilitate curriculum development in order to ensure alignment within subjects. At Foster High School, a prime example of this work is the vertical alignment of all mathematics courses.

### *Emphasis on Postsecondary Education*

Echoing the message of the administration at Foster High School, school staff members indicated that although successful completion of coursework and passing state examinations is extremely important, the ultimate goal is to prepare students for the future. To that end, school staff members encourage learning beyond high school and emphasize the need for postsecondary education and/or career training. Administrators typify this by talking to students individually and at school assemblies about the importance of postsecondary education. Counselors also discuss college options during meetings with students. In the fall of their senior year, counselors meet with students to discuss their future plans in general and their college plans in particular. Students are also given information about financial aid and scholarships and can receive assistance in completing college applications.

Foster High School advocates for and participates in several programs designed to promote the enrollment of their students in postsecondary institutions. In the Letting Education Achieve Dreams program, designed by WCJC, ninth graders are encouraged to pursue postsecondary education by means of various exercises that demonstrate the direct relationship between education and salary. The students are given the message, “You can, anybody can, go to college.” Tenth graders are required to complete a Web-based career interest and planning system that helps them explore potential career options. Lamar CISD is currently implementing an Academic Career Pathways program that helps students link their classroom instruction with further education and training. These pathways are based on the sixteen federal career clusters that range from “Agricultural, Food & Natural Resources” to “Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.” The district’s CTE department also participates in a college-preparatory program for technical careers. Through each of these programs, students are exposed to and encouraged to plan for life after high school.

In addition to helping students identify potential future careers and the education these careers require, Foster High School has several programs to ensure that students attain their postsecondary goals. For example, Foster High School participates in the College Goal Sunday program that provides free information and assistance to Texas families applying for financial assistance. The Texas Scholars: High School and Beyond initiative focuses on preparing students for the transition from high school to highly skilled careers. Started by the Texas Business and Education Coalition, Texas Scholars sets forth a program of rigorous coursework in an effort to better prepare students for their postsecondary endeavors. The expansion of the dual-credit course offerings previously mentioned also facilitates this increased academic rigor and preparation.

### *Academic Support*

To prepare students to develop a four-year academic plan, counselors routinely visit ninth-grade English classes and make group presentations on high school graduation requirements. These presentations are followed by individual student conferences, so that individual coursework plans can be discussed and developed. Counselors and students then revisit these academic plans every spring to evaluate progress and make adjustments as needed. Counselors are also available for meetings with students throughout the academic year.

To support students' academic plans, Foster High School teachers offer three additional student-level support systems. All teachers have scheduled tutoring hours either before or after school. On Monday nights teachers are offered additional pay for tutoring at the school library until 8 p.m. This support system has been very popular with Foster High School students. Students also have the option to request additional coursework support in a 30-minute advisory period during the school day. Students who wish to take advantage of this additional time request a pass from a specific teacher, which allows them to return for additional tutoring on homework or class material.

For at-risk and economically disadvantaged students, a teacher mentoring program has recently been introduced. The goal of this mentoring program is to pair a teacher with an at-risk student so that a particular teacher takes a special interest in the student's school career.

#### *Continuous Monitoring of Each Student's Progress*

Starting in the ninth grade, Foster High School administrators implement a support system that encourages continuous monitoring of each student's progress. Each ninth grader is assigned to one of four assistant principals; that assignment lasts until the student leaves the school. Thus, assistant principals can monitor their students' progress and build a relationship with the students and their parents. This is only one of many ways in which the staff and administration demonstrate their high expectations for and commitment to their students.

*We are attacking it by so many different directions and it is good that we do, rather than just have one avenue, because different kids react to different things. I think with all the different things that we do, hopefully we have a plan that would touch each one of our students and help them be more successful.*

*—Leadership Team member*

For those students who are deemed at risk of academic failure, a number of services have been designed and implemented. As previously mentioned, teacher mentoring has recently been introduced as a way for teachers to take a special interest in, and develop trusting relationships with, their students. The district also offers a credit restoration program that affords students the opportunity to make use of computer-assisted learning programs to catch up on course credits they might be lacking. This program is available from 7 to 8 a.m. every morning, from 4 to 5 p.m. every afternoon, and from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday.

The drop-out prevention program, known as 1621 Place, allows students to go to a special campus for a half day or full day of self-paced computer learning. This program allows students who have fallen behind to catch up to their peers or to work toward a general equivalency diploma. Lamar CISD is currently establishing a night school at their 1621 Place campus to serve those students who must leave school during the day to go to a job.

### *Focus on Positive Results*

When students succeed in their academic or extracurricular activities, the school makes it a point to celebrate these successes publicly. During school announcements, administrators will play a special song whenever students attain their goals. This has become a motivating factor for many students, as they strive to hear the song played in their honor. College acceptances and scholarship awards are prominently displayed for all to see on a recognition wall to both celebrate the accomplishments and to encourage other students. Administrators also proudly display a large number of student-made artwork in the main office. An end-of-year awards ceremony is held every May to honor and recognize the accomplishments of Foster High School students. These are examples of the many activities Foster High School uses to strive to live up to its school motto: “Above all, students first.”

### *Parental and Community Involvement*

Parents are given ample opportunities to participate in school activities and in planning their child’s educational choices through teacher conferences and meetings. Although fewer than 50 percent of parents typically participate in programs targeted directly to them, counselors were quick to note that this in no way meant that the parents were not involved in their children’s education: many parents follow the specific interests of their children, whether it is participation in athletics, choir, band, or art shows, and many parents participate in school volunteer programs.

Foster High School engages and involves the local community through its Service Cords program. This program awards a Service Cord that students can wear during their graduation ceremony to indicate that they have performed volunteer work for the community. Many local businesses also assist Foster High School students by offering a number of scholarships to help defray the cost of their postsecondary education.

### *Continuous Search for New Approaches to Improvement*

The fundamental desire to help every student has led the staff and administration of Foster High School to be open to new and innovative ideas. Every new teacher brings a fresh enthusiasm and new educational techniques to the school’s PLCs. Through the establishment of common planning times, the administrators have also provided teachers with new opportunities to collaborate and establish cohesive and comprehensive strategies to help their students.

One of the key support systems for innovative thinking at Lamar CISD is the Lamar Educational Awards Foundation (LEAF). A nonprofit organization, LEAF has awarded approximately \$900,000 in grants to teachers who demonstrate innovation in the classroom. The recipients of these grants are provided with additional funds for educational programs or activities intended to benefit teachers or students.

## **Conclusion**

Across racial/ethnic and income groups, ACT-tested graduates of Foster High School have seen notable improvements in test scores, taking a core curriculum,

college and career readiness, educational aspirations, and enrollment in college. ACT researchers have identified a number of policies and practices that are consistent with these improvements. Taken together, these policies and practices may serve as a model for other high schools—particularly those with substantial enrollments of minority students—that are attempting to improve the academic achievement and the college and career readiness of their students.



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